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Creating a Library Orientation Game for Freshman Engineering Majors

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Abstract

"Mystery at the Library" is a simple, inexpensive game developed as a library orientation activity for freshman engineering students. Players searched the library building and online to find clues and solve the mystery of a stolen book. Feedback from players and library desk staff was used to improve the game over time. A straightforward narrative with puzzles focused on learning objectives kept players engaged and avoided unnecessary confusion. A post-game survey indicated that the game was both helpful and fun for a majority of respondents.

Keywords

Library instruction; Information Literacy; Games; Engineering

Background

Rose Library, which opened in 2008, is a five-story science, technology, and health library at James Madison University (JMU), a four year public university with an undergraduate teaching focus. In 2008 JMU also welcomed the first freshman class into its new Bachelor of Science in Engineering program. While all JMU students receive information literacy instruction as part of the university's general education program, the Applied Sciences Librarian is responsible for familiarizing engineering students with discipline-specific library services and resources. However, the structure of the engineering program presented some challenges when it came to providing lower level library instruction sessions. Engineering majors spend much of their freshman year taking prerequisite courses in science and math. During the early years of the program, only one 100-level Engineering course was offered during the fall semester. The Applied Sciences Librarian worked with the instructor of this course to arrange for a brief one-

shot instruction session to introduce herself and some of the engineering resources available at Rose Library and online. As this course did not include a research assignment, another challenge was designing the instruction session to present information that would be relevant to the students without duplicating the information literacy sessions from their general education courses.

Based on comments made in other instruction sessions and interactions at the desk in Rose Library, it seemed that many JMU freshmen did not know that Rose housed the science, technology, and health collections as well as the offices of subject specialist librarians in these areas. Students living close to Rose Library appreciated having a convenient study space, but those who spent most of their time on the other side of campus did not always realize why they might want to visit Rose. Familiarizing engineering freshmen with Rose Library was thus a high priority for library instruction. An improved understanding of the resources and services available in this building would support the Association of College & Research Libraries' (ACRL) Information Literacy Standards 1 and 2 by helping engineering students to "[determine] the nature and extent of the information needed" and "[access] needed information effectively and efficiently" (2000).

The librarian decided to create a special library orientation activity for freshmen in the engineering program that could be completed outside of class. Ideally, this activity would not only introduce students to Rose Library but also provide them with a shared experience and serve as scaffolding for the subsequent in-class library instruction session. The large number of freshmen in the engineering program, and their different class schedules, made it impractical to organize a guided tour of Rose. Engineering majors also seemed likely to prefer a hands-on activity that would allow them to experiment with library resources on their own.

One possibility was a scavenger hunt. A library scavenger hunt, also known as a treasure hunt, is "an assignment designed to acquaint novice students with the physical library and its resources. It comprises a list of questions that have no immediate relevance to course content, and it is not preceded by a formal library orientation or instruction session" (McCain, 2007, p. 21). Such an activity would give students experience exploring the library building and introduce them to some library resources, but scavenger hunts can be problematic. Ly & Carr (2010) describe these activities as "much criticized, even hated by many instruction librarians as an ineffective ways to teach research skills" (p. 1). Reference librarians and desk staff may find themselves called upon to help one student after another with the same set of questions. Although there is evidence that scavenger hunts are helpful in making students more comfortable using the library and that they are more effective than library tours (Marcus & Beck, 2003;) Brown, Weingart, Johnson, & Dance, 2004), a traditional scavenger hunt did not seem as if it would be very engaging for students.

An idea for a non-traditional scavenger hunt was inspired by a brief item in the *American Libraries Direct* newsletter about Alternate Reality Games (ARGs):

> An ARG is a game that utilizes the real world as a gameboard and everyday communications mechanisms (cellphone, email, snail mail, etc.) as the controls. Think of an ARG as a form of live-action roleplaying game that doesn't necessarily involve a role...it is you, and not a character you are portraying, trying to unravel the mystery or solve the puzzle. (Griffey, 2008)

A mystery-themed game that required players to search for clues in the Rose Library building and online could cover content similar to a traditional scavenger hunt, but might be more entertaining and memorable.

Literature Review

Much of the literature on the use of games in library instruction deals with computer games. This review will focus instead on games that combine real-world exploration of the library space and an introduction to library services and resources with a fictional narrative. These activities will be referred to as "library mystery games." The use of narrative is what distinguishes a library mystery games from a traditional scavenger hunt. A scavenger hunt presents students with a list of tasks to complete, while a library mystery game presents them with a story in which they will play a role.

A number of academic libraries have used library mystery games as orientation activities. At Queensborough Community College, "Mission Quite Possible: A Library Adventure" invited players to figure out where a missing student had gone by retracing her steps through the library (Marcus & Beck, 2003). At each location they received a clue indicating where the student had gone next and what library materials she had been using. This included audio recordings, reference books, microfilm, and an online database. By following the student's research trail, players were able to determine that she had left the college to pursue her dream of becoming a Hollywood actress.

The "Library Mystery Tour" at Niagara University replaced the conventional librarian-guided tour that had been included in freshman orientation (Kasbohm, Schoen, & Dubaj, 2006). As with "Mission Quite Possible," the mystery was a missing person case: the disappearance of the valet of writer F. Scott Fitzgerald. Students were divided into teams and assigned roles such as recorder and navigator. A prerecorded message provided the backstory and introduction to the game while librarians distributed the first set of clues. Students then explored the library,

examining a variety of resources and talking to staff to gather the information they needed to solve the mystery.

Some library mystery games resemble murder mystery dinner parties, and use props and actors to add realism. At Christopher Newport University, librarians organized a murder mystery event as part of freshman orientation (Boykin & Willson-Metzger, 2005). Incoming freshmen were invited to a special after-hours party at the library. The festivities were soon interrupted by the announcement that a professor had been found dead. Students formed teams and searched the library for clues, which involved finding special book dummies in the stacks. These fake books were given real catalog records so players could gain experience searching the online catalog and locating items by call number.

Other games blend real-world elements with a computer game or multimedia content. "Secret Agents in the Library," developed at Lycoming College, is a Flash-based online game "designed to be played in the library classroom at a specific time" (Broussard, 2010, p. 24). Players took on the role of secret agents tasked with capturing an intruder. The game asked a series of questions that could be answered by using both the library website and materials found in the library building. At certain points in the game students had to enter a numeric code to continue. To obtain these codes, they first had to locate a particular book or journal volume in the library collection.

An Egyptology-themed ARG called "Blood on the Stacks" was created at Trinity University to replace a traditional scavenger hunt activity used during freshman orientation (Donald, 2008). An email was sent to freshmen announcing the game and inviting them to visit a website to learn more. The website contained an introductory video, instructions for the game,

and the first clues to the mysterious theft of an Egyptian artifact. Students had three days to work with their orientation groups to find clues in the library and online and identify the thief.

Another library ARG, "The Lost Book", was developed at Kansas State University (Ireton, Pitts, & Ward, 2013). The narrative of this game is unusual in that it features a mystery without a crime. The story involves "a brother and sister, who grew up solving puzzles, cyphers, and mysteries together," and a half-forgotten book (p. 123). On the website for the game, the brother challenges his sister and anyone else who cares to participate to find the book, and promises "to leave…hints, clues, maybe a puzzle or two" for players both in the library and online (Caesar Cypher, 2012). "The Lost Book" was a voluntary activity not tied to university orientation or a specific course. References to the game website were "seeded across campus" in a variety of ways, including flyers and an advertisement in the student newspaper (Ireton, Pitts, & Ward, p. 123). Students who discovered the site were then free to decide whether or not they wanted to join the game.

Development

Reading about the success of these library mystery games was encouraging, but several factors constrained this project. There was no budget available to purchase game materials, hire a computer programmer, or produce video recordings. The librarian had no previous experience as a game designer. While ideally students would be free to complete the game at their own pace and at a time that would be convenient for them, the needs of other library users and staff had to be taken into consideration. The game would need to be quiet and largely self-directed to avoid interfering with normal library operations.

The game, titled "Mystery at the Library," was designed with three major learning objectives in mind. First, it should familiarize students with Rose Library as a space, exposing them to some of the different information sources housed in the building. Second, it should provide students with an opportunity to gain experience with several basic library tasks, including checking out an item on reserve, looking up a book in the online catalog, and finding a book on the shelf using its call number. Finally, the game should introduce students to RefWorks, an online reference management program that allows users to save citations and generate bibliographies.

Although these learning objectives support ACRL Information Literacy Standards 1, 2, and 5, the game alone would not lead to all of the desired outcomes for these standards. For instance, learning about RefWorks could help students to consistently cite sources (ACRL, 2000, Standard 5.3.b) but nothing in the game would indicate that failure to cite sources can be considered plagiarism. However, the purpose of "Mystery at the Library" was to supplement rather than replace a more traditional information literacy instruction session. Content that lent itself most easily to a game could be presented in that way, while other content could be covered in class. In *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*, veteran designer Raph Koster discusses what types of concepts games are best suited to teaching, such as exploration of a space: "Games also teach us how to examine the environment, or space, around us…Classifying, collating, and exercising power over the contents of a space is one of the fundamental lessons of all kinds of gameplay" (2005, p. 54). While it is possible to design a game that teaches about plagiarism[1], a comprehensive information literacy game would be a challenging project for a novice game

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[1] See for instance the University of Florida's GAP (Gaming Against Plagiarism) project at http://digitalworlds.ufl.edu/gap/.

designer. A game that focused on library exploration seemed like a better use of both the game format and the resources available for this project.

The narrative for "Mystery at the Library" was inspired by Marcus and Beck's "Mission Quite Possible" (2003) and Donald's "Blood on the Stacks" (2008), as well as the *Carmen Sandiego* series of educational computer games, in which players follow the trail of a thief and gather clues along the way to match the culprit to a member of Sandiego's criminal organization. While many library mystery games involve solving a murder or missing person case (Marcus & Beck, 2003; Boykin & Willson-Metzger, 2005; and Kasbohm et al., 2006), the theft of a rare book seemed a more appropriate crime for a library setting. In order to appeal to engineering students, the stolen book would be a (fictional) notebook said to have belonged to inventor Nikola Tesla. Before "Mystery at the Library" was used with students, library desk staff went through the clues and provided feedback that led to a more streamlined version of the game.

Introductory materials including game instructions, a brief description of the crime, and the profiles of four suspects were distributed to players through the website for their class. The profiles included the name, favorite author, and research interests of each suspect (see Figure 1). All of the suspects were said to have attended a reception for library donors on the evening of the theft. Players were given one week to figure out which of the suspects had broken into the Rose Library display case after the reception and stolen the notebook. The instructions told players that they were free to ask library staff for help with looking up books and finding things in the library but that staff could not assist them with figuring out what the clues meant.

Name: Lucida Sans
Occupation: President, Nikola Tesla Fan Club
Favorite Author: Neal Stephenson
Research Interests:
Perpetual Motion Machines, Photography

Name: Cooper Black
Occupation: Special Agent, FBI
Favorite Author: Agatha Christie
Research Interests:
Computer Science, Wireless Communication

Figure 1: Profiles of two suspects

The pilot version of the game also featured a detective character. Players were told that this detective, who specialized in rare book theft, was busy with another case and would not be able to make it to campus for several days. She needed on-the-scene assistants to search Rose Library for clues. A blog and Gmail account were created for the detective character and players were instructed to email her with news of their progress.

Participants in a library scavenger hunt are typically given a worksheet listing the items or information that they are required to find. Given the mystery theme of the game, this seemed both unrealistic and uninteresting. The game's instructions told players that they could find the first clue, a piece of paper dropped at the crime scene, on reserve at Rose Library. Most of the clues used in the game were photocopies of pages from books and articles about Tesla, with references to other works highlighted and additional notes by the thief printed in red. The first clue contained a highlighted citation for a book and a note indicating that the thief had been doing research in the library. After looking up the book in the catalog and locating it in the stacks, players would find a second clue hidden beside the book. This clue contained the call number for another book, which had the next clue hidden with it, and so on. The library books

used in the game all related to Tesla's life and work, and included the biography *Tesla: Man Out of Time* by Margaret Cheney and *AC/DC: The Savage Tale of the First Standards War* by Tom McNichol. The clues were placed in red folders with extra photocopies in the pockets for players to take with them. These folders were the only special materials that were purchased for the game and cost less than a dollar each. The identical, brightly colored folders made it easy for players to recognize a clue once they had found it, yet were relatively inconspicuous on the shelves.

One of the clues (see Figure 2) contained a username and password hint for the thief's RefWorks account. Once players had looked up the password in *The Dictionary of Energy*, they could log in to the account, view the citations saved there, and match these to the interests of one of the suspects. They submitted their identification of the guilty suspect through an online quiz, which was also used to track participation in the activity.
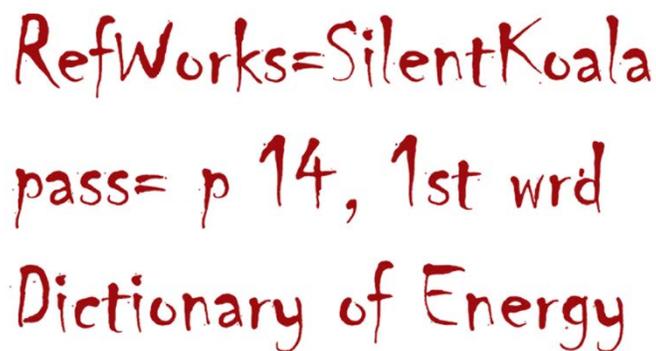
RefWorks=SilentKoala

pass= p 14, 1st wrd

Dictionary of Energy

Figure 2: A clue left by the thief

"Mystery at the Library" made its debut as a library orientation activity for freshman engineering students in the fall of 2010. While this first run of the game was largely successful, survey responses from the players, comments from the library desk staff, and the librarian's observations helped to identify several points in the game where players tended to get stuck.

Koster defines a good game as "one that teaches everything it has to offer before the player stops playing" (2005, p. 46). If the sticking point was something that made "Mystery at the Library" more challenging or added to the atmosphere but did not actually teach players anything about the library, it was eliminated to improve the game. A clue that required solving a coded message was dropped, as was the requirement that players email the detective character in order to obtain one of the clues. Some players had become confused about when they needed to email the detective, while others emailed her with basic questions about using the library which could have been answered by the desk staff. The detective character had been intended to add excitement and realism to the game, but in practice this element proved to be frustrating and time-consuming for both the librarian and the players.

For many players the most challenging task in the game was locating *The Dictionary of Energy*. Several players came to the desk to report that that this book was missing from the stacks upstairs when in fact it was shelved in the first floor reference section. The catalog record lists the location of the book as Rose Lib-Reference, but the meaning of this was not obvious to all players. This puzzle was kept in the game since locating materials is a real part of the research process. However, the difficulty players had with this portion of the game provided evidence that the reference section was not obvious to our users. A sign was soon added to the first floor indicating the location of the reference section.

An updated version of the game with revised instructions and a simpler narrative was introduced to engineering students in the fall of 2011. A common suggestion from this group of players was that the game should be longer, with more exploration of the Rose Library building. Some players also said that they wanted the clues to provide them with more guidance. For 2012, a new clue, the thief's "to do" list, was added to the beginning of the game (see Figure 3). The

list provided students with an overview of the game's structure while preserving the mystery narrative. This addition also expanded the game in terms of both physical space and types of information resources covered by requiring players to visit the bound journals section. Previous versions of "Mystery at the Library" had focused on finding books, and players had not been required to visit the second floor of the building (where periodicals are shelved) at all.

To Do List
*Research before reception:
    -Science Education journal, 1993
        Not online, check periodicals section
    -History of electricity
    -Tesla's life
*Set up RefWorks account:
    -Think of a cool username
    -Think of a good password hint
*Reception – act natural!!!
*Steal notebook

Figure 3: The thief's "to do" list

Assessment

In the fall of 2012, two sections of a 100-level Engineering course required of all engineering majors at JMU participated in the "Mystery at the Library" game. A third section of the course that did not participate in the game served as a control group. An online survey (see Appendices) was distributed to all three sections of the course after the experimental group completed the game and before any of the sections received in-class library instruction. This survey asked students to rate their familiarity with library tasks on a 5-point Likert scale

(1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree). The control group was asked an additional question about preferred learning styles, while the experimental group was asked to provide feedback about the game. Of the 44 students in the experimental group, 34 completed the survey (77%). The control group included 24 students, and 22 completed the survey (92%).

The responses from the control group about learning styles provided support for the assumption that engineering students would prefer a hands-on activity to an explanation of how to use library resources (see Figure 4). When asked "How do you prefer to learn how to do new things?" respondents were on average most likely to agree with the statement "I like to try it and see if I can figure out what to do." As the survey was only distributed to engineering students, further study is needed to determine whether preferred learning style varies by major.
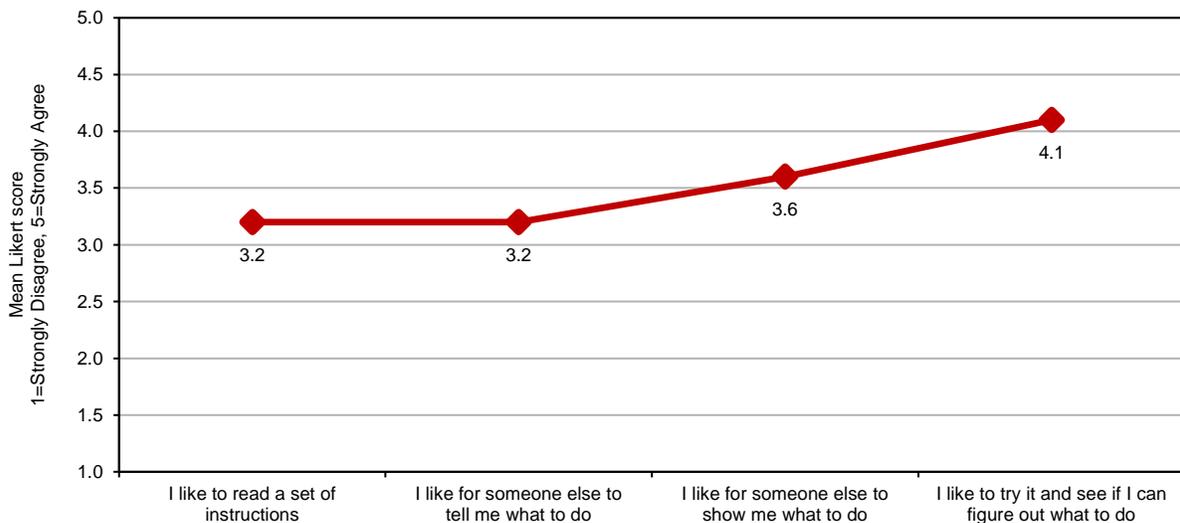
Figure 4: Preferred learning styles (N=22)

After completing the library mystery game, the experimental group indicated greater familiarity with each of the listed tasks than the control group (see Figure 5). The most dramatic difference was in familiarity with RefWorks, a tool that many students had not heard of before participating in the game.
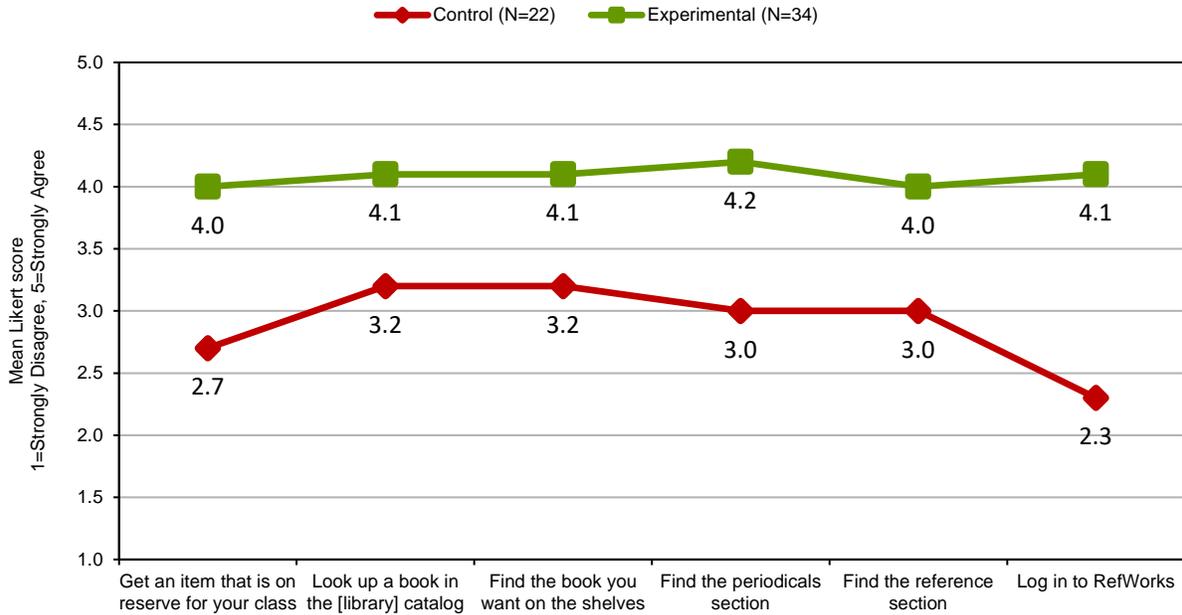
Figure 5: Familiarity with library tasks

Reaction to the game was favorable, with a majority of respondents in the experimental group agreeing that the activity was both fun and helpful (see Figure 6). The game was recommended for use with future classes by 79% of respondents.
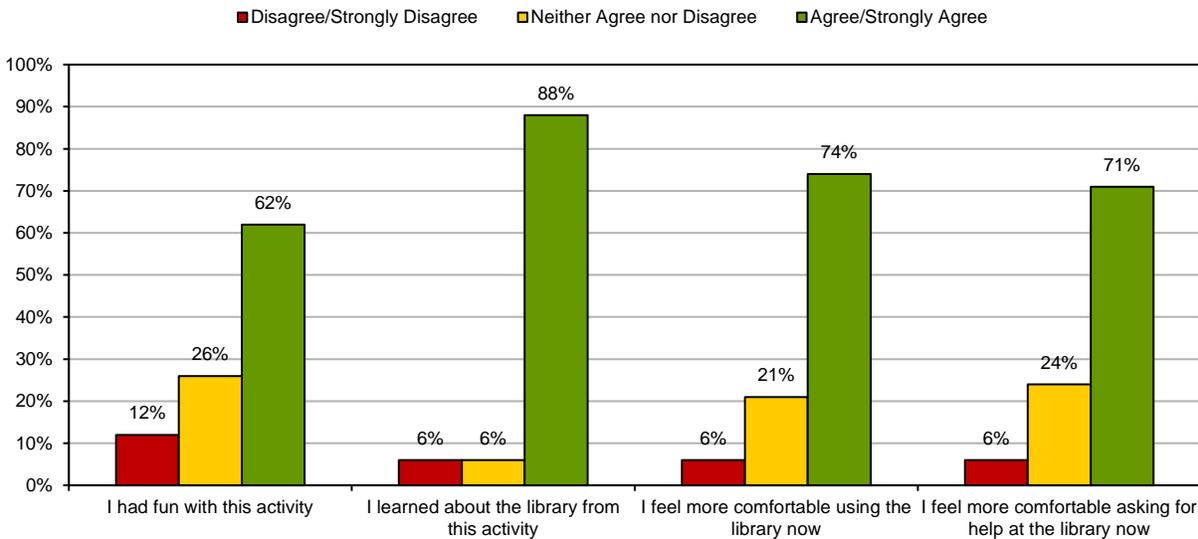

Figure 6: Evaluation of the game by players (N=34)

In the comments section of the survey, respondents described the game as "a great activity," "fun," "interesting," and "unique." When asked to describe one thing they had learned from the game, the most common answers were about the layout of the Rose Library building, the library catalog, Library of Congress call numbers, and RefWorks. The most common suggestions for improvement were that it should be made clearer to players when they had reached the end of the game, that the game should be longer, and that the clues should be easier.

Conclusion

"Mystery at the Library" succeeded in helping engineering freshmen become more familiar with the layout of the library building and common library tasks. The activity was rated as both enjoyable and educational by the students who participated. As this study involved only a self-assessment of familiarity with library tasks, it does not provide a true measure of learning. Further study is needed to assess the educational value of this activity and its effectiveness compared to other methods of library instruction.

Desk staff reported that the game was not overly disruptive. Most of the questions they received from players were simple requests for directions or assistance with the library catalog. Several players commented upon the helpfulness of the library staff on the post-game survey.

Input from both players and library desk staff was valuable in identifying areas for improvement in the game. Early versions of the game featured a more complex narrative and included puzzles that enhanced the game's atmosphere and provided additional challenge but did not serve an instructional goal. These elements sometimes caused players to become unnecessarily confused. The game was revised to eliminate these sticking points. A simple

narrative was sufficient to provide structure for the game, and navigating a large, unfamiliar library proved to be enough of a challenge for the players.

During the in-class instruction session for the experimental groups, the librarian was able to refer to the narrative of the game to introduce information literacy topics not covered by the game itself. The book theft plot provided a natural segue into a discussion of ethical use of information. As Nikola Tesla has often been referenced in both science fiction and conspiracy theories, a Web search on Tesla can be used as an illustration of why it is important to evaluate sources carefully and how even sources that contain accurate information may not be appropriate for an academic assignment. Since a unit of measurement, an electric car manufacturer, and a rock band have been named in honor of Tesla, a database search on "Tesla" can serve as a starting place for a discussion of constructing good search terms and how to use database limiters to filter irrelevant results.

Although "Mystery at the Library" was designed with engineering students in mind, it could easily be adapted for use with students in other disciplines. Instead of using library materials related to Nikola Tesla and energy research, the call numbers and citations in the clues could be changed to direct students from other majors to library materials that would be relevant to their studies. The stolen book is simply a plot device, and need not be a book from the library collection or even a book that actually exists. It could be described to players as anything from the original manuscript of *Pride and Prejudice* to a high-demand chemistry solutions manual.

A lack of funding was not an obstacle to creating a successful game. Puzzles were designed around the library building and existing library resources. The game clues were simply pieces of paper in red pocket folders. While it is possible that multimedia elements, more elaborate props, or the use of actors might have made the game more entertaining, none of the

survey respondents suggested such additions. Instead students wanted the game to be longer, with many of their comments indicating that the element of exploration was the aspect of the game that they found most interesting.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A

Table A.1: Control Group Survey

How do you prefer to learn how to do new things?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I like to read a set of instructions	O	O	O	O	O
I like for someone else to show me what to do	O	O	O	O	O
I like for someone else to tell me what to do	O	O	O	O	O
I like to try it and see if I can figure out what to do	O	O	O	O	O

Do you know how to perform the following tasks at Rose Library or online?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Get an item that is on reserve for your class	O	O	O	O	O
Look up a book in the JMU library catalog	O	O	O	O	O
Find the book you want on the shelves in the library	O	O	O	O	O
Find the periodicals section (magazines & journals)	O	O	O	O	O
Find the reference section (dictionaries & encyclopedias)	O	O	O	O	O
Log in to RefWorks	O	O	O	O	O

Please share any comments or questions you have about using the library for research.

Appendix B

Table B.1: Experimental Group Survey

Did you participate in the Mystery at the Library activity?

O Yes, I completed it.

O I started but did not finish.

O No, I did not participate.

Would you recommend this activity for other classes?

O Yes

O Maybe

O No

Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I had fun with this activity	O	O	O	O	O
I learned about the library from this activity	O	O	O	O	O
I feel more comfortable using the library now	O	O	O	O	O
I feel more comfortable asking for help at the library now	O	O	O	O	O

Do you know how to perform the following tasks at Rose Library or online?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Get an item that is on reserve for your class	O	O	O	O	O
Look up a book in the JMU library catalog	O	O	O	O	O
Find the book you want on the shelves in the library	O	O	O	O	O
Find the periodicals section (magazines & journals)	O	O	O	O	O
Find the reference section (dictionaries & encyclopedias)	O	O	O	O	O
Log in to RefWorks	O	O	O	O	O

Please describe one new thing you learned from this activity.

Do you have any suggestions for improving this activity?

Please share any other comments you have about this activity.